

# How to Lead a New National War on Poverty

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When New York City launched its war on poverty in 2006, Mayor Michael Bloomberg began a city-wide campaign the likes of which no other city, state or the federal government had seen in decades. Through its flagship agency – the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) – the city launched more than 60 initiatives aimed at reducing poverty, some tried-and-true strategies and others bold experiments.

Ten years later, the results of this grand experiment – a poverty rate that is the lowest among the biggest cities in America – could yield a vast number of useful lessons for a new national war on poverty, informed by New York City's experience.

The most important lesson, however, is the value of data and an evidence-based approach to social innovation. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of New York City's effort around poverty was the ability to document what worked and what didn't and to offer other local governments a blueprint to follow. But there is also a critical role that the federal government can play to encourage and support the kind of innovation that led to New York City's success.

For example, the incoming Administration should consider the financial benefits of developing a nationwide antipoverty evidence base. In this age of big data and limited resources, local governments must be given the tools to document the programs started on a small scale. We can't afford to lose the valuable information that can be gleaned from each new social services approach. And because every government dollar has to be spent wisely, we can't continue putting good money after bad.

It's time to understand the power of collecting data, and how to use that information to make future decisions about helping people toward self-sufficiency.

The first step is to learn how to produce uniform data that can be shared. The federal government can play a big role in supporting cities to generate, share and use the right data. To start, they could make federal datasets accessible, creating easy linkages for localities to pull down and match with local data. Federal agencies can also add value to their technical assistance support by beefing up intermediary organizations to provide data sharing and support assistance.

Cities *are* incubators of innovation, but much of it goes undocumented. CEO was unique because we captured and shared the lessons. Cities need to be supported in developing good research approaches, especially those that can be completed at a low cost by cash-strapped mayor's offices.

Federal officials could also provide the definitive guidance on how to interpret confidentiality limitations so that localities can stop hiring lawyers to re-answer the questions in the way nervous lawyers typically do: with a no.

The federal government can help to capture knowledge by encouraging local evaluation methods that foster solid documentation of what works. The use of waivers to test and evaluate new approaches needs to be fully exploited, and agencies should allow blended funding to get better results.

Also, why not create an open-ended call for innovative approaches each year in the social services field, and marry that with strong evaluation? The federal government should encourage experimentation by challenging localities to run with their most innovative ideas.

As the base of new approaches grows, the federal government can facilitate the spread of best practices by building incentives, rewards and requirements to use evidence-based approaches into grant programs. It can also make these tools easier to access at no cost by requiring federal agencies to post on their websites free, evidence-based tools and implementation protocols, as was done by the Department of Health and Human Services.

In a new war on poverty, evidence and innovation will be what matter most. Because localities do not realize how many resources and potential partners are out there to urge on solid research on social services, the federal government can lead the charge by strengthening its own technical assistance partners—improving its research clearinghouses and intermediary technical assistance grants, and fostering more government/university partnerships.

New York City has considerable private resources, and now Mayor Bill de Blasio, to continue the CEO's work. But other localities with far fewer resources will require a way to network with other innovative cities and states, and the support of the federal government.

Some of this is already beginning to happen at the federal level, with the creation of the federal Social Innovation Fund and the newly created White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation. In 2010, CEO secured \$5.7 million over three years from the Social Innovation Fund to replicate and build broader evidence for its programs. This multi-year, multi-million dollar grant has enabled CEO to expand five of our most promising programs locally and establish them in seven other cities across the nation.

In less than ten years, CEO has shown that when a political leader makes fighting poverty a priority and builds an organization based on evidence, real progress can be made that will blaze the way for more effective action. New York City has created a model that can be used across many municipal landscapes, and there is far more that could be done by the next President to encourage and support this evidence-based approach to winning today's war on poverty.